

‘Goodbye It’s 1987’: Generation of the New

David Matless

School of Geography, University of Nottingham, University Park, Nottingham NG7

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Email: David.Matless@Nottingham.ac.uk

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Abstract

This paper reflects on Cosgrove and Jackson’s 1987 *Area* paper ‘New directions in cultural geography’, discussing its place within British geography in the 1980s, the associated conferences organised through the Institute of British Geographers, the continuing resonance of its themes, and the nature of a ‘classic’ paper. Historical analysis is combined with personal memory to consider the paper’s role in generating a ‘new’ cultural geography.

Keywords

New cultural geography, Institute of British Geographers, conferences, classics

Denis Cosgrove and Peter Jackson’s 1987 ‘New directions in cultural geography’ was, in keeping with its journal outlet, a paper of modest size. Its few pages charted many possibilities, most followed up in subsequent years by an expanding academic field, within which many, including this author, have made their living. Where predictions and proposals were made (for geographies of consumption, for intertextual analysis), these were generally realised, and some themes vouched in 1987 continue to be claimed as novel; recent calls for geographical storytelling are anticipated by the 1980s anthropological concern for ‘writing culture’, while suggestions of a ‘green’ cultural geography resonate with debates over the Anthropocene. If Cosgrove and Jackson came to their cultural paper through different trajectories – historical geography and social geography respectively – and would subsequently develop very different bodies of work in the humanities and social sciences, ‘New Directions’ represented an important point of conjunction, notably as a meeting point of humanities geography and contemporary cultural studies. While some geographical works in this century have consciously distanced themselves from the new directions of 1987, notably to claim a nonrepresentational approach, the novelty of recent ‘newer’ approaches can be overstressed; aesthetics and materiality, everyday life and politics, creativity and action, all informed these older new directions. 1987 continues to chart our present. ¹

It is instructive to reflect on what it was to be new in 1987, and on the spaces through which ‘New directions’ emerged. Cosgrove and Jackson’s opening summary notes that: “The issues reviewed in this paper will be among those discussed at the forthcoming

Social Geography Study Group conference at University College London” (Cosgrove and Jackson 1987, 95). Two things are worth noting here. First, this was a study group of the Institute of British Geographers, before the contested merger with the Royal Geographical Society, where the IBG has since effectively become the research division, its name surviving only in brackets. Secondly, this was a Social Geography rather than a Cultural Geography group. Cultural geography had no formal presence in the IBG at this time, and the 1987 conference helped encourage the 1988 renaming of the SGSG as the Social and Cultural Geography Study Group. The process is described by Chris Philo in his introduction to the 1991 collection *New Words, New Worlds* (in which Cosgrove and Jackson both feature), itself a product of a September 1991 study group conference in Edinburgh “reconceptualising social and cultural geography”; an event itself prompted by the deliberations of an IBG Limited Life Working Party on the state of social and cultural geography (Philo 1991). New directions are shaped by bureaucratic motions, and the emergence of cultural geography in its present form indeed owes much to the workings of the old IBG, which offered, whatever its predominant preoccupations, a space and machinery through which efforts could be made to foster difference and novelty. Annual IBG conferences took place in January, rotating around different universities or polytechnics, with vacant winter student halls offering standard accommodation for all, basic facilities through which to work. Cold confinements made for a particular style of geographical collective, rather different to present summer, and generally metropolitan, annual gatherings.

As a postgraduate committee member of the study group as it underwent its name change, and as one of the academic committee organising the ‘New Words, New Worlds’ conference, this was my own academic formative time. I retain odd conference programmes of the era, including the ‘New directions’ conference, at which I presented a paper (possibly my first) at the end of one year of PhD research, and the January 1987 IBG annual conference (certainly my first), held at Portsmouth Polytechnic. The content of the latter goes some way towards explaining the impulse for the former, and it is worth considering these documentary survivals as pictures of 1980s geography.

The Portsmouth IBG conference handbook, its cover designed by the polytechnic cartographic unit (“The cover shows silhouettes of the Mary Rose, HMS Victory, HMS

Warrior and HMS Invincible together with outline maps of Portsea Island in 1710 and 1987") [FIG.1], and with an inside advertisement for the handy new British Telecom phonecard ("All you need to make a phone call"), proceeds through general information to the full programme of papers. Figures who would be associated with cultural geography's new directions appear occasionally within variously themed sessions, including Philo on asylums in 'Current Research Directions in Medical Geography', Felix Driver on workhouses in 'Papers in Historical Geography', Nigel Thrift on locality studies in 'Regional Geography', and Jackson chairing part of 'The Political Geography of Thatcher's Britain'. Cultural theory is however barely evident, with a session on 'Concept, Theory and Rural Geography' (including Sarah Whatmore, Sarah Harper, Jo Little, Nigel Thrift and Paul Cloke) the likeliest spot. Of 29 sessions only two, 'Images of Britain: Post War Topographic Description' and 'Experiential Geography', can be characterised as falling under a 'cultural' banner as set out in the *Area* 'New directions' paper, and then by topic as much as approach. 'Images of Britain', convened by Brian Goodey of Oxford Polytechnic, and including John and Margaret Gold on architectural critic Ian Nairn, considered presentations of landscape and nature in post-war topographic literature. 'Experiential Geography' was the conference humanistic session, presenting a form of work which struggled to be heard in subsequent years. While memories of Portsmouth are patchy, 'Experiential Geography' sticks in the mind for its final presentation. After papers by John Eyles and Paul Rodaway, Douglas Pocock presented 'A symphonic poem of a cathedral city', the abstract stating: "One focus of experiential geography is the senses by which we engage the world. After a verbal introduction, a collage of sounds of Durham is arranged to illustrate the music of geography". Pocock's presentation remains in the memory for its notable and indeed brave style, and for the argument which followed over the seemingly apolitical nature of humanistic enquiry, and over aesthetic claims to present the essence of place. In retrospect, the playing on cassette tape of an artfully and carefully arranged symphonic poem of a city within a geography conference might leap from 1987 to 2016 with ease (as should the critical discussion which followed afterwards). Questions of sound, experience and landscape (and indeed questions of 'Images of Britain') remain pertinent in today's geography.

From January to September, from Portsmouth to London, to 'New Directions in Cultural Geography', held from 1-3 September at the Department of Geography, University College London ("Public telephones are located on the ground floor"). The cover of the unstapled conference booklet is uncredited, but shows different images of power to the IBG montage [FIG.2]. A future historian of geography, with no memory of the period, finding only the cover scanned online, might wonder if this was a far Right gathering exploring the possibilities and predicaments of "white power". The strident image, a progressive's nightmare, somewhere between LS Lowry and Peter Blake, signalled that here was a cultural geography comfortable with conflict, and with exploring images of an urban and divided Britain. Not that rural Britain didn't feature in the conference; the final morning brought an East Midlands block of critical papers on rural landscape imagery from myself ('Improving landscape and citizens between the wars: illustrations from the work of Vaughan Cornish, geographer'), Pyrs Gruffudd (then a PhD student with Cosgrove at Loughborough) and Stephen Daniels (then my own PhD supervisor at Nottingham). Cosgrove did not present a paper at the conference, but acted as a discussant for David Ley on landscapes of consumption, and for Jim Blaut on 'Cultural geography: some problems and non-problems'. Jackson spoke on 'The politics of Carnival'. Speakers were predominantly from the UK, of varying career stages, mainly geographers but including figures from cultural and media studies (an important interdisciplinary connection at the time), and the conference moved across the historical and contemporary, urban and rural, empirical and theoretical.² The memory is of a supportive, stimulating, rewarding three days at a department then marked as a key centre for new cultural work; UCL speakers on the programme were Jackson, Jacquie Burgess and Jane Jacobs.

My Portsmouth IBG programme contains barely a note or a doodle; I must have made notes elsewhere, on papers since discarded. The UCL programme, with its generous margins, served however as a handy jotter. Marginal scrawls in the 'New directions' booklet indicate 1987 trains of thought:

Use of familiar forms

Memory sited in the landscape

E End as (violated) urban pastoral

Territory-biology-savage

Writing as mapping heterotopias
Drama and music hall, song, oratory
Against left 'false-consciousness' interp of popular conservatism
Use of an ancient form
Goose Fair – sleaze
apocalypse-revolution-faith
The unconscious?
place pride etcet
But the author is still present
Again the power of old forms

1987 would seem to have prompted for one attendee not just thoughts of new directions (of theory, topics, politics), but preoccupations with the old; and now of course these are themselves getting-on-for-old times, 1987 the year of a 'classic'.

In his 1981 essay 'Why Read the Classics?' Italo Calvino reflects on the nature of the literary classic, and the qualities ascribed to works falling under that label. Of Calvino's 14 'definitions', some have scant purchase on 1987 *Area* articles (whether by Cosgrove and Jackson or anyone else), as with definition 4: "A classic is a book which with each rereading offers as much of a sense of discovery as the first reading" (Calvino 2000, 5). The recent vogue for geographical excavations of disciplinary classics, in *Area* and elsewhere, does not necessarily imply any admiration for composition, for writerly complexity, for hidden depths. Some of Calvino's other 'classic' qualities do however register with 'New directions', and indicate why a 1987 paper might be worth revisiting, or visiting. Given the contentious disciplinary memory surrounding a term such as 'new cultural geography', Calvino's definition 7 is pertinent: "The classics are those books which come to us bearing the aura of previous interpretations, and trailing behind them the traces they have left in the culture or cultures (or just in the languages and customs) through which they have passed" (5). Definition 8 follows: "A classic is a work which constantly generates a pulviscular cloud of critical discourse around it, but which always shakes the particles off" (6). The revisiting of disciplinary classics may both supplement the cloud, and help its parting.

In his definition 1, Calvino notes how people “usually” say they are “rereading” rather than “reading” the classics: “At least this is the case with those people whom one presumes are ‘well read’; it does not apply to the young, since they are at an age when their contact with the world, and with the classics which are part of that world, is important precisely because it is their first such contact” (3). Calvino continues: “The iterative prefix ‘re-’ ... can represent a small act of hypocrisy on the part of people ashamed to admit they have not read a famous book” (3). So if you have never read Cosgrove and Jackson (1987), whether this would be your umpteenth rereading, whether you claim recall over three decades, or if you simply think you know what it says; do read it.

Notes

1. The title of this paper is taken from a song of the same name by Microdisney, released in 1985 on their LP *The Clock Comes Down the Stairs* (originally issued by Rough Trade, reissued by Cherry Red in 2013). Loops of time run through the record.

2. The full list of speakers at the conference was, in order of presentation: Gillian Rose, Jackie Burgess, David Mitchell, Mike Heffernan, Judith and Andrew Sixsmith, Eleonore Kofman, Jim Blaut, Angela McRobbie, Peter Jackson, David Ley, Derek Gregory, Nigel Thrift, Peter Larkham and Mike Freeman, John Bale, Jane Jacobs, Stanley Waterman and Yoram Bar-Gal, Pyrs Gruffudd, David Matless, Stephen Daniels, Peter Murphy, Ullrich Kockel.

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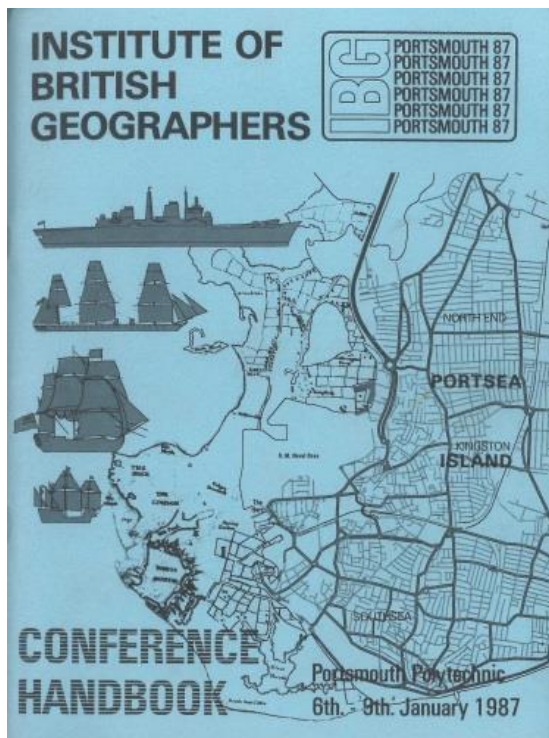
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Figures

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